

Post Office Admits Mail Monitoring

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The U.S. Postal Service last year monitored and recorded for periods of a month or more the origins of all mail received by some 4,400 individuals and businesses in the United States at the request of dozens of federal, state, and local agencies, Postal Service statistics reports to Congress show.

The statistics, which were obtained last night by The Washington Post, show the agencies requesting the mail surveillance ranged from the Agriculture Department, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and Interstate Commerce Commission to local police departments and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The figures, scheduled to be released today at a hearing of the House Judiciary subcommittee on administration of justice, are believed by committee sources to be the first time the full extent of mail surveillance within the United States has been publicly disclosed.

Sources in the subcommittee, which is headed by Rep. Robert W. Kastenmeier (D-Wis.), said Postal Service officials have maintained to the staff that the surveillance is legal, although the officials have admitted they did not know why agencies such as Agriculture would want to look at individuals' mail.

Answers to these questions are expected to be given at today's hearing. While the answers could not be obtained

last night, one committee source speculated that Agriculture may be trying to uncover fraud in its food stamp program. However, the source pointed out that these law enforcement methods are carried out without court orders.

In contrast, the American Telephone & Telegraph Co. said it requires a subpoena or summons before disclosing records of its customers' toll calls.

The mail surveillance, known as mail covers, does not entail opening mail.

Instead, it involves recording the data on outsides of envelopes before mail is delivered to homes and businesses. This information, such as names and addresses of the senders and the date and location of postmarks, is forwarded to the agency making the request for the cover.

In addition, second class magazines, third class advertising material, and fourth class parcel post may be opened.

The Postal Service, in its mail cover regulations, said mail covers are available only

to law enforcement agencies to protect national security, locate a fugitive, or obtain evidence of a crime or attempted crime.

Recently, William J. Cotter, chief postal inspector, said the regulations as published by the Postal Service this month have been unchanged for some time, with the exception of modifications in the approval system within the postal agency.

Despite this, the mail cover statistics reported last week to Kastenmeier show that most of the agencies requesting them are not normally considered law enforcement agencies.

Among these agencies, with the number of mail covers they initiated in 1974, are Naval Intelligence Service (2), Army Intelligence Command (3), Air Force Special Intelligence Command (3), Air Force Special Investigations Office (10), Interstate Commerce Commission (2), Commerce Department (2), HEW (1), Agriculture (2), and an unidentified department of welfare (2).

In 1973, when 4,701 mail covers were put in effect, the

agencies responsible included a state real estate commission (3), a department of public welfare (4), and a fish and wildlife agency (1), the figures show.

In addition, the figures show the Central Intelligence Agency had two mail covers in 1973. The CIA has said it stopped its program of surveying and opening mail between this country and foreign countries in February, 1973.

Other agencies obtaining mail covers in 1974 included FBI (714), IRS (1,452), Postal Inspection Service (1,550), Drug Enforcement Administration (228), Secret Service (26), state and local agencies (53), local police and sheriffs (180), Coast Guard (2), Interior Department (1), U.S. Marshal (9), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2), Customs (32), Immigration and Naturalization Service (4), Labor Department (4), unidentified local district attorneys (35), "general state attorney" (5), local prosecutor (6), Justice Department (25), unidentified state bureau of revenue (1), local law enforcement (4), and unidentified departments of public safety (10).

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